

Media Disinformation: TV Networks Give Americans a “Sanitized Version of War”

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U.S. television networks have given the public a sanitized, largely bloodless view of the war in Iraq, an academic authority on communications writes.

“The contrast between what Americans saw on the news and what European and pan-Arab audiences saw is striking. Foreign news bureaus showed far more blood and gore than American stations showed. The foreign media were delivering audiences the true face of the war,” writes Michelle Pulaski, an assistant professor at Pace University, New York.

“BBC Television (British Broadcasting Co.) and American stations often covered the same stories but with stark contrasts,” Pulaski wrote, using the example of a “friendly fire” episode on an Iraq battlefield. “Immediately following the event, BBC television broadcast live from the scene with a detailed report of the horror including the blood-stained road, mangled vehicles, and the number of casualties. Several hours later CNN had very little to report on the event and only mentioned that a friendly fire incident had occurred, and there was no word on U.S. casualties. This example represents a trend of sanitized, relatively gore-free broadcasting that was seen throughout U.S. war coverage.”

“The American people did not see the bodies of dead American soldiers, and few Iraqi casualties were aired,” Pulaski added.

In an article in “The Long Term View,” a publication of the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover, Pulaski said that CNN dominated broadcast TV coverage of the First Persian Gulf War, and that the current war coverage has been led by FOX News. FOX News was the top-rated news network prior to the war and maintained lead as its viewership rose by 239% to 3.3 million viewers, Pulaski wrote. However, Pulaski faulted FOX for abandoning its slogan “Real journalism, fair and balanced” for that of “a war cheerleader demeanor that many viewers seemed to like.”

Pulaski wrote the networks engaged in frequent “personalization and individualization” “to gain a wide audience” during their Operation Iraqi Freedom coverage. “Similar to guests on a talk show, biographies of soldiers were detailed along with shots of family farewells and reunions all in an effort to identify with the audience and of course in turn boost ratings.”

What Pulaski refers to as the networks’ “infotainment style of coverage” is characterized by “lack of anti-war commentary, sanitization of news and lack of reporter objectivity.” She points out that Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), a media watchdog organization, reported that in the critical three weeks following March 20th, 2003, opponents of the Iraq War were greatly underrepresented on TV.

After monitoring ABC World News Tonight, Fox's Special Report with Brit Hume, and PBS's News Hour With Jim Lehrer, among others, FAIR found that only 10% of news sources interviewed were opposed to the war and that criticism of military planning was rare, Pulaski wrote.

Pulaski goes on to note the U.S. government "heavily censored" some 600 "embedded" reporters traveling with the military and that the reporters "were not allowed to go far from their units, thus possibly missing out on many noteworthy causes." She noted that Norman Solomon, director of the Institute for Public Accuracy, has said embedded reporters "may as well be getting a P.R. retainer from the Pentagon."

Loss of objectivity could also be seen in the wave of patriotism that swept through media coverage, Pulaski wrote, including reporters with flags on their lapels and stars and stripes waving in the background. MSNBC, she noted, displayed a wall of heroes entitled "America's Bravest" which contained photos of loved ones overseas sent by viewers. "This wave of patriotism, apparent after the September 11th attacks, led to a sanitized and biased version of the war coverage."

Pulaski warned "It is up to the individual media consumer to be critical in gathering news information on the war from a variety of sources—ideally entertainment free sources." She concluded: "After Operation Iraqi Freedom, there will be no going back to the days of war correspondence without the embedded reporter and the subsequent movie deals conflicts bring. TV viewers should have no worries; we will continue to be entertained."

The Massachusetts School of Law at Andover is a non-profit law school purposefully dedicated to the education of students from minority, immigrant, and low-income households who would otherwise not have the opportunity to obtain a legal education.

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